

# On the Need of Children for a Mother and a Father

*A Report by the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission*

1. On 6 May 2020, Archbishop Davies requested that the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission “give their attention to the nature and practice of foster care and adoption, with respect to the expectation that children under either program would be placed within a family where the parents were a husband and wife.” Dr Davies noted the importance of theological reflection on this topic, “given current threats to the foundational character of family for human society, as God has revealed his intentions in the Scriptures.” He also noted that this work would be particularly relevant to Anglicare Sydney, so that it can be demonstrated that Anglicare’s practice is consistent with the doctrines, tenets and beliefs of the Diocese of Sydney. This report has been produced by the Doctrine Commission in response to this request. It is proposed that this report will be received and endorsed in due course by the Sydney Synod as a statement of the doctrine of our diocese.
2. This report is primarily addressed to situations where it is necessary for a child to be cared for outside the biological family, such as foster care and adoption. The principles that shape appropriate care in these situations are derived from God’s pattern for the nurture of all children, and the report begins with a brief overview of this pattern.

## God’s pattern for the nurture of children

3. God created humanity with the capacity for **reproduction** – a male and female pair able to produce offspring through a sexual union. God created humanity with a capacity for **relationship** – made in God’s image to relate to him and to each other (Gen 1:27-28a). These capacities for reproduction and relationship are divinely intended to come together in the union of a man and a woman in marriage.
4. The one-flesh union of husband and wife is the biological and relational sphere in which children are rightly brought into the world and nurtured. The covenant of marriage is divinely intended to provide a stable and enduring context for the raising of children (Mal 2:15). Marriage does not necessarily result in offspring, but where there are offspring it is intended that this should occur in the context of a marriage. One of the purposes of marriage is that children may be raised by their biological mother and father – a mother and father who are committed to each other for life, and who love their child with a godly love.
5. God’s intent is that children experience the care and nurture of both mother and father (together representing God as his image bearers) who have made an exclusive, lifelong commitment to each other that unites the two biological sexes (male and female) from different genetic families. This is marriage. It is in this relational context that children are born and find a home in the world.
6. For children, growing up entails physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturation. The Scriptures make clear that the responsibility to nurture children in each of these domains belongs to both mothers and fathers (e.g., Prov 29:3, 15, 17; Eph 6:1-4). For children, the experience of relating to parents of both the same and opposite sex is profoundly formative, especially as they discover and develop their own identity. In a context where both sexes are valued and celebrated, children also

learn to appreciate and respect those of the opposite sex.

7. Parenthood involves taking on a God-given responsibility to nurture a child – physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually – from conception through to adulthood. Parenthood should be expressed in the giving of one’s self for the sake of the optimal care of the child, so that the child can grow to a maturity that embraces the full potential of their humanity.
8. God has established the family unit as the normative context for children to be born and raised. The family unit is one reflection of God’s special care of, and protection for, all humankind, especially the vulnerable. Parenthood is meant to be reflective of God’s relationship with humanity, as the one who both creates and sustains life.

### **Principles for the care of children outside the biological family**

9. The Bible recognises that in our fallen world the experience of family does not always conform to the biblical pattern. For a range of reasons – whether birth outside of marriage, or the death, incapacity or extreme poverty of parents, or the breakdown of marital relationships, or neglect or abuse by parents – children are not always raised in a stable family with a mother and father. In this broken and sin-cursed world, the family experience of many children falls far short of the ideal.
10. Vulnerable children are precious to God. The Lord is “the father to the fatherless, a defender of widows [... who] sets the lonely in families” (Ps 68:5-6). The same divine concern is also seen in Jesus’ tender care expressed toward children: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them” (Matt 19:14). God’s compassion for vulnerable children is manifest in his commands to his people to look after orphans (e.g., Deut 10:18-19, 24:17, 19; Prov 23:10; cf. Ezek 22:1-2, 6-7; Jas 1:27). This is both an expression of our love for our neighbours and our love for God, who himself loves and helps the vulnerable (Ps 10:14). God’s people must seek to provide the best care possible when it is necessary for a child to be raised outside the context of their biological family unit.
11. Optimal care is modelled on the pattern described above – it involves intimate mothering and fathering in a domestic context (even if the ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are not the child’s biological parents), where physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual nurture can occur. The welfare of the child must be paramount – the focus must always be a child’s need to have parents, not an adult’s need to be a parent.
12. This is not to deny that good can result from other forms of parenting – the Scriptures provide positive examples of single parents (e.g., 1 Kings 17). God is able to bring about good for children out of less than ideal circumstances, where there are no better alternatives. But where there are choices as to circumstances, we should not normally choose options which will deprive a child of the opportunity to be both fathered and mothered, so that they are able to grow in all the ways previously mentioned. A child who needs to be nurtured outside the biological family is already in a regrettable situation. Our aim must be to retrieve as much good as possible, and to minimise as much harm as possible, adhering as closely as possible to God’s pattern for family life. Therefore, when considering placements for foster care or adoption, optimal care will provide a child with the opportunity to be both well-fathered and well-mothered.

## Cooperation between Christians and the state in relation to out of home care

13. Christians were pioneers in the establishment of orphanages (e.g., Constantinople, c. 350AD), long before governments took responsibility for the care and raising of children without parents. There is abundant evidence that the early Christian communities were a refuge for orphans and abandoned children.<sup>1</sup> Although in more recent times the state has taken up this responsibility, and the state's involvement allows for the care of more orphans than the church could provide by acting alone, this does not negate or render unnecessary the ongoing involvement of the church. The people of God still have a duty to reflect God's character of love and concern by caring for widows and orphans (Jas 1:27). Providing a new family and a stable domestic context for an orphaned or abandoned child, or a child in need of alternative parental care, remains a good that the church should engage in today. To that end, there remains a role for Christian organisations to partner with the state in the provision of fostering and adoption services.
14. Christians share common goals with the state. Both recognise that adoption must seek to provide optimal care for children, which entails a commitment to "the best interests of the child concerned, both in childhood and later life" ([Adoption Act 2000 \(NSW\) No.75, Chp.2, Sect.8](#)).
15. For Christians, the Scriptures give authoritative guidance as to what that optimal care should entail. It is clear from the Scriptures that it is optimal for a child to be well-mothered and well-fathered. In circumstances where a child's own parents cannot provide this nurture, Christians can work in a constructive partnership with the state to provide a placement with a family where the child's need for both mothering and fathering can be met.
16. Christians have a duty to act on behalf of vulnerable children, out of love for the child, and for their best interest. We see in the Scriptures that every child, as a divine image-bearer, has inherent dignity and is of surpassing worth. Every child is worthy of love. Because it is God's desire that every child has a mother and a father, our love of the orphan will be expressed by seeking to provide new families for children in need of such a provision.

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<sup>1</sup> As was noted by Lucian of Samosata as early as the second century AD (*De Morte Peregrini*, 12). Also, at the urging of Bishop Basil of Caesarea in 374, Emperor Valentinian outlawed infanticide as recorded in (*Codex Theodosius* 9.41.1). Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 126ff.